

On being Santa – the gift that gives back

By Mary Peterson

With a nickname like “Bear” and the dimensions to go with it, you might reasonably expect that notice of an impending safety inspection by Muñiz Engineering’s Ed Handwerk could send workers into a frenzy of clean up, spruce up, fix up, before the great one came thundering through. That has been known to happen, at least once, when a worker, new to the Sonny Carter Training Facility, warned his buddies in a panic, “We’re havin’ a safety inspection, and they’re sending this big guy, and he’s called a “bear!”

In truth, Bear Handwerk, is really more the jolly sweet elf of his Christmas-time persona, Santa Claus, than the awesome bruin his nickname suggests. And a convincing Santa he is. Naturally endowed with a baritone ho-ho-ho and an easy presence with children, he dons his red velvet, fur-trimmed suit, topping it off with a realistic, curly white beard, and the transformation is complete.

It was enough to convince Olivia Harris, 6, granddaughter of Muñiz’s Howard Sloan. She got an early audience with Santa and Mrs. Claus when she shared a photo session recently at JSC and received some early presents. So convinced was the young girl that she gave Santa a bit of her own advice: “Remember, it will be cold when you leave [the North Pole], so you’d better put on a sweater before you get in the sleigh!”

Still another time, Handwerk, dressed in jeans and red suspenders, had settled into a backroom station at a Friendswood styling salon to get his newly purchased wig and beard trimmed to a more suitable length. Although the door was shut, it wasn’t enough to keep out the curious, prying eyes



NASA JSC Photo 14795 by Bill Stafford

Georgia and Ed Handwerk transformed to Mrs. and Mr. Santa Claus share the the holiday spirit with Olivia Harris.

of a small girl, bored with waiting for her mother. “Merry Christmas!” smiled Handwerk. Recognition was immediate, and the young girl ran to the forward part of the salon, shouting for all to hear, “Mama, Mama! Santa Claus is back there, and he’s getting a haircut!”

This marks the fifth year Handwerk has played Santa, which he does as a community service, and the fourth year

he has worked with the Friendswood Fire Dept. on its annual Santa Rides, where fire trucks are paraded through neighboring streets and candies are dispensed to the children. For the past two years, wife, Georgia, a recreational therapist, has joined in as Mrs. Claus.

Why a Santa? “I enjoy being Santa,” Handwerk says, “because the kids enjoy it so much. I get back much more than I

give.” And, it’s not just the kids. He gets parents and other adults into the spirit.

Lest you think being Santa is a piece of cake, consider. Although usually excited, kids are sometimes overwhelmed, sometimes scared, and sometimes these emotions are manifest in a warm, wet feeling on Santa’s leg. This results in a swift, lateral pass to mama that would make Troy Aikman proud.

Then, of course, there are those who want to put Santa on the spot. “You should know what I want. What are YOU going to bring me?!” This calls for some fast eye-hand-lip coordination in the direction of the parents for some clues.

Proof that Santa appeals to all ages, Handwerk often has band students who want a picture with Santa, or he’ll kibitz with the local police who help with the parade. And, groan, there are even a few, long since past hugging-size, who want to sit on Santa’s knee.

The Bear has developed his own philosophy of giving. “I think of Santa, not as a religious tie-in, but as the universal ambassador of love and goodwill, and this is what I try to impart to the children. I do, after all, get children of all faiths – Judaism, Muslim, Hindu, and others.” Never far removed from his work as a senior safety engineer, he also reminds tots to stay clear of lighted candles, fireplaces, and other hazards associated with the season.

One of Handwerk’s more touching missions is paying visits to the elderly and infirm. “We have a number of assisted living homes in Friendswood,” said Handwerk, “and nurses will help wheel out the disabled to see Santa. Often this includes handicapped children. It’s the highlight of their season. Mine, too.” ■

JSC employee shares the spirit of giving throughout the year

It’s the holiday season again, where countless greeting cards wax the warmth of the season and that familiar ringing outside of the local retail stores remind us to give to those less fortunate.

But all around us are people who give of themselves every day – the story of JSC’s Ernie Romero is one such example.

Two years ago, *Space Center Roundup* first reported when Romero and his wife, Cheryl, adopted four sibling children to join their first two.

Since then, the Romeros have united as a family and, in fact, were recently recognized as Family of the Year by the Texas Department of Protective and Regulatory Services. But the story doesn’t stop there. If you take a quick glance at all that this man does, you’ll see the true meaning of giving.

Any parent will tell you, (and some childless people too!) – children are a lot of work and bringing them up right is an unguaranteed challenge, even for the most diligent of parents. Try raising six, compounded with the emotional weight that comes with adopting. Courageous is a word that comes to mind.

Anyone who has met the Romeros will tell you they’re doing a great job with their family. “They are both just really neat people,” said Diane Scruggs, the Romeros’ caseworker. She couldn’t say enough good things about how nurturing the Romeros are and how well disciplined the children are with them. “I have really bonded with Ernie and Cheryl through this process and just to walk into their home, you can see how close they’ve become as a family and how much the kids respect them.”

Ernie Romero says his emphasis on academics has really pulled the family together. “My wife and I are both pursuing computer science degrees, so the kids see us studying at night and working on assignments,” said



ALL IN THE FAMILY: The Romeros were named Family of the Year by the Texas Department of Protective and Regulatory Services. Left to right, Victoria, 8, Ernie, Carlos, 5, Alex, 7, Sarita, 13, Anna, 10, Cheryl, and Ernie Jr., 10.

The Romero family would like to extend a special thank you to Sue Garman, Kaz Hall-Farley and the Executive Board of the American Federal Government Employees Union for their support.

Romero. “And a lot of times, we all go to the library together, so they see that the work it takes to achieve your goals in life.”

The Romero children aren’t missing a beat. Ernie Jr., Anna and Victoria were recently selected to represent their district in academic competitions, and Romero says all the children are bringing home good grades. “My biggest goal for them is to get a solid education,” said Romero.

Romero is heavily involved in activities for other foster children, whether its bringing NASA and crew paraphernalia

to gatherings to excite them and help reinforce the education message or rounding up the Houston Fire Department or D.A.R.E. representatives to participate in special events. “I can’t bring enough NASA stuff. I always run out,” he said.

Romero, a mechanical engineer in the manufacturing and production branch, started as a machinist at JSC more than eight years ago. “I grew up in Los Angeles and I know how important it is to have someone to mentor you, to be a role model,” said Romero. “That is why I try so hard with

these kids. It was scary at times, to think of taking on four more children, but we knew we could not let them down. We couldn’t bare the thought of them getting separated.”

Romero’s philosophy is extended to other children in the community and to co-ops as well. He frequently welcomes co-ops and recent grads to his home for family functions and holiday dinners to give them a “home-away-from-home.”

“He was quick to open up his home to me,” said Ebonika Williams, who co-oped in Romero’s division last fall. “He and his wife are great and they have one of the most loving families I’ve ever met. I always feel welcome and he’s always been there to listen to me. He’s very positive and pushes me to do well.”

Aside from being the father of six and a college student on the side, Romero runs a side business called Jump-a-thon which rents “moon walks” for special events and charitable causes. He also volunteers extra time with CPS as a mentor for other adoptive and foster parents.

“He is always there to help,” said Scruggs. “Even on short notice, I can call him and without hesitation, he is willing to help. He and his wife are really a team – they’re one of a kind.”

For Romero, this is just his way of giving back. “During the process leading up to the adoption, there were a couple times I caught myself thinking, ‘Oh – can I really do this?’ But at those same times, I would always see a sign to keep me going, pushing me to save these four lives.”

In his mind, the children went through so much before reaching him, that they’re heroes to him, but the kids feel the same way. “They tell me, ‘Dad, we know you’re not an astronaut but you’re still our hero.’”

So remember this holiday season – love is the best gift of all. ■